"CATHOLICITY AND CIVILIZATION": CATHOLICS AND THE CAPITALIST ETHIC IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines arguments made by American Catholics that "Catholicity" promoted progress and that Catholic morality was essential to capitalist societies. These arguments developed in two contexts: as responses to charges that "popery" caused poverty; and in debates over relationships between Catholicism and capitalism. Articulate Catholics compared the social and economic conditions of Catholic and Protestant nations, and argued that the former were preferable. Only the Church, they insisted, could provide the morality necessary for the state and marketplace. While dissenting from the faith of the American majority, these intellectuals did not reject the political and economic ideologies of American culture. Rather, they assimilated them, and adapted them to Catholic ends.

Since they first appeared in 1905, Max Weber's essays on The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism have provided the focus for continued, and often contentious, scholarly debate. Economic historians such as R. H. Tawney, Amintore Fanfani, Gordon Marshall and David Landes have critically examined Weber's central arguments about the "elective affinity" between Calvinism and capitalism in the early modern world. Social theorists such as Talcott Parsons and Anthony Giddens have drawn upon Weber's conception of "rationalization"—the progressive disenchantment of the world—in order to explain the emergence of modernity. Sociologists such as Gerhard Lenski and S. N. Eisenstadt have tried to determine the significance in advanced societies of a "religious factor" in patterns of socio-economic mobility and educational achievement. And while subsequent historical and sociological investigations have challenged many of the essays' empirical claims, Weber's text continues to inform research programs in such fields as social psychology, education, and the sociology of religion.

While this essay does not intend to review the vast literature surrounding Weber's theses, it will consider one of the subjects his analysis raised concerning the relationships between religious beliefs and economic behaviors: differences between Protestant and Catholic attitudes towards work, poverty, and the accumulation of wealth. Though Weber remained chiefly concerned with the unintended economic consequences of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and the neo-Calvinist emphasis upon work in one's calling, he did suggest that Protestant and Catholic ethics differed in a number of ways. Most important to his central argument was the distinction between the "other-worldly" asceticism of medieval monks with the "inner-worldly" asceticism of Puritans. Both groups,
as Weber depicted them, subscribed to work ethics of diligence and self-denial, and both
groups accumulated treasures, either in this world or the next. But while the Catholic
Church presumed that only members of a spiritual elite would submit to the rigors of
monastic rule, Calvinist Protestants demanded disciplined lives from all believers. The
medieval Church expected that the laity would work—sloth, after all, was a serious
sin—but cycles of rest, feasts and holy days would punctuate the routines of daily labor.
Weber’s Protestants knew no such leisure. Their work ethic was “modern” in contrast to
the “traditional” attitudes of the Catholics. Thus, this “inner-worldly” asceticism of
Protestants provided the physical and psychological elements that would give rise to the
“spirit” of modern capitalism.6

Unlike many of the liberal anti-clericals of his day, Weber did not argue that the
Catholic Church’s veneration of the poverty of monks and clerics necessarily dissuaded
the faithful from the pursuit of worldly goods, for few Europeans were more wealthy, and
worldly, than the merchants of the Italian city-states. Rather, Weber argued that the cult
of holy poverty, along with the medieval Christian prohibition of usury and Biblical
injunctions against avarice, had created social and cultural conditions that inhibited the
long-term, “rational” accumulation of wealth. No such inhibitions troubled Protestants.
For them, economic success in their now-sanctified worldly callings provided an indica-
tor of their membership in the elect. Wealth was now a sign of God’s favor, and poverty,
especially the voluntary poverty of the mendicant orders, was to be avoided, not ad-
mired. Protestants were not to squander that wealth on luxuries, but to save and invest
it. This inner-worldly asceticism, as Weber construed it, compelled Protestants to gen-
erate the surplus employed in the rapid expansion of commercial activity in the early
modern period. Protestantism alone, in Weber’s analysis, fostered the cultural and the
material conditions necessary for the development of modern capitalism. Individual
Catholics might well engage in capitalist activities, but Catholicism was most compatible
with forms of “traditional” economic behavior.7

Weber suggested that by the eighteenth century secularization was eroding the
connections between Calvinist doctrines and modern capitalism; yet he noted the differ-
ential effects of religious affiliation in his own time. He began the Protestant Ethic essays
with a discussion of religious creeds and social conditions in contemporary Europe. The
northern nations which had supported the Reformation—the Netherlands, Scotland,
and England—were among the wealthiest and most advanced societies, while the Catho-
lic states of the south—Spain and Italy—were not. Within the German Reich and the
Austrian Empire, it was Protestants who appeared overrepresented in industrial and
scientific pursuits, while Catholics preferred artisanal and other traditional occupations.
He offered some detailed evidence to support these characterizations, but he presumed
that his comments about the progressive nature of the Protestant nations and the back-
wardness of Catholic peoples needed little explanation. Though not an anti-Catholic,
Weber subscribed to the standard German liberal position that the Roman Church
impeded national unity and development. The contrasts that he made between eco-

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nomically and socially forward-looking Protestants and traditionally-minded Catholics were typical in the early years of the twentieth century, as they were since the eighteenth. This essay will explore a chapter in the conceptual history of these commonplace themes on the contrasting nature of Catholic and Protestant societies.8

In particular, this article will focus on the claims made by American Catholics during the nineteenth century that “Catholicity” promoted, not hindered, the progress of “civilization” and that Catholic morality was essential, not inimical, to a capitalist society. Catholic intellectuals developed these positions in two interrelated contexts. The first context was the response made to charges by evangelicals and nativists that “popery” caused poverty, and that immigrants from “popish” nations were particularly unsuited for American society. The second was the European debate over the compatibility of Catholicism, liberalism, and capitalism. Although many of the continental Catholic disputants in this larger controversy voiced hostility toward democratic polities and suspicions about non-hierarchical societies, their American co-religionists adopted these European defenses of “Catholicity” and adapted them to new circumstances. Preachers, editors, and educators compared the economic and the moral conditions of Catholic and Protestant nations, and found the former superior. Protestantism, they suggested, led to religious indifference and moral decay, especially among the commercial and industrial classes. Catholicism, however, provided the stable morality and the sound virtues necessary for the state and the marketplace. The Church produced good citizens and provided the answers to the problems created by economic development. When translated into Weberian terms, these clerics and laymen argued that there was an affinity between the blessings of Catholicity and the benefits of liberal democracy and commercial capitalism.

The equation of Protestantism with liberty and prosperity, and Catholicism with poverty and tyranny, existed as a central tenet in the public culture of eighteenth-century British North America; and it would continue as a prominent feature in nineteenth-century American public discourse.9 Though civil penalties against the tiny Catholic minority disappeared in the wake of the American Revolution, the suitability of Romanists as citizens of a commercial republic remained open to question. When addressing this concern, articulate Catholics such as John England, the bishop of Charleston, and Mathew Carey, the Philadelphia publisher and political economist, argued that their faith was fully compatible with the political, social, and economic conditions of the United States. The Church obliged all Catholics, England contended, to obey legitimate authorities, and surely would do so in a republic where they participated in choosing their governors. The bishop dismissed allegations of treachery and divided loyalties by emphasizing Catholic participation in the Revolution, and by explaining that while all Catholics acknowledged the spiritual authority of the Pope, they owed him no allegiance as a temporal ruler.10 Mathew Carey, in evaluating the economic and social conditions of his co-religionists, pointed to his own achievements as the proprietor of the largest publishing house in North America and to the success of Catholic artisans, merchants, profession-
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als, and planters. Where Catholics did number among the poor, in particular in the seaports along the east coast, he ascribed their distress to low wages and limited domestic markets, rather than to devotional or doctrinal particularities. Given the political liberties and the economic opportunities of the United States, there were, he submitted, no reasons why Catholics should not be as prosperous or prominent as their neighbors.¹¹

Like the majority of his fellow Catholics in nineteenth-century America, Carey was an immigrant, and in such publications as Letters on Irish Immigrants and Irishmen Generally he counseled prospective settlers to prepare themselves for lives of hard labor and substantial, if gradually earned, rewards. Carey had come to Philadelphia from Ireland thanks to the sponsorship of Benjamin Franklin; and he championed the virtues of self-discipline and disinterested benevolence recommended by his patron. In Franklin, Weber found the embodiment of the capitalist spirit of inner-worldly asceticism and rational acquisition, and Carey's example proves that public adherence to that ethic was not limited to Protestants. The deist Franklin and the Catholic Carey might politely disagree over matters of faith, but each advocated the same bourgeois ethic of diligence, thrift, honest, and sobriety. While Carey's rise to riches was far from typical of Irish immigrants, he was among the first in a long succession of advocates who endorsed the political and economic order, and who urged their fellow Catholics to adapt themselves to American institutions.

Carey and England's American Catholic apologetic of patriotism and prosperity would prove a durable one, and would be regularly employed against political and confessional critics of their faith. The volume and the pertinence of such criticisms increased during the nineteenth century, however, as the Catholic minority grew larger in numbers but poorer in material terms. With the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Irish, German, Slavic, and Italian migrants from the 1820s onward, the church of Maryland planters and Philadelphia merchants became a church of the urban poor.¹² Evangelical ministers, social reformers, and political nativists insisted that popery was the root cause of the immigrants' poverty. The Roman church, they maintained, by promoting the holy poverty of monks and mendicants, and by requiring the laity to pay for the upkeep of a corrupt, indolent clergy, degraded honest, remunerative work and defrauded its adherents.¹³ When making these accusations, the advocates of learned and popular anti-popery presumed that there was a causal link between religious beliefs and economic behavior: once Catholic converted, or migration from Catholic nations ceased, Protestant diligence would replace popish indigence. Thus, the political economy of the evangelicals and nativists intertwined doctrinal and material modes of analysis.

These rhetorical assaults prompted Catholic responses. In the pages of such journals as the United States Catholic Magazine, the Catholic World, and the American Catholic Quarterly Review, lay and clerical editors and reviewers offered an alternative explanation of their Church's views on work, wealth, and poverty. They granted that Catholics honored the voluntary poverty of those in religious orders: their disciplined self-denial was worthy of emulation. But monastic rules did not offer manuals for the secular world.
The Lord called only a few to the rigors of the religious life. For the rest, the church acknowledged that honest labor in mundane callings pleased God: in the words of Ignatius Loyola, "laborare est orare"—to work is to pray. If riches resulted from one's labor, they were God's blessing. Wealth, per se, was not sinful; avarice and covetousness were. If hard work produced few rewards, that too was God's will. The Church did not enjoin or encourage her members to be poor; rather, she taught the poor to find contentment with their lot and reminded the rich of the obligations of Christian charity. A number of commentators waxed effusively about the economic prospects of the Catholic community. In an essay for the Catholic World entitled "Put Money in Thy Purse," M. T. Elder invited his co-religionists to fill the ranks of "bankers, merchant princes, railroad kings ... and factory owners." In a society where poverty was a "disgrace," and proselytizers targeted the poor, Catholics who proved capable had a duty to become rich. The "gift of money-making," as he termed it, should be "held as a high vocation." Elder was not interested in simply producing a new generation of "prominent businessmen and manufacturers," however; he wanted to ensure that the Church had the resources necessary to construct and operate its ever-expanding networks of parishes, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and asylums. The separation of church and state, and the suspicions of the Protestant majority, had denied the Church access to public funds and had placed a heavy burden on the laity. An expanded class of wealthy Catholics could assume those obligations. Elder's exhortations to "make money not only honestly ... but abundantly" are similar in style and substance to those found in such American Protestant way-to-wealth pieces as Russell Conwell's Acres of Diamonds. There are few differences between this American Catholic injunction towards work and wealth creation and the one espoused by Conwell, a Baptist. Elder's essay exemplifies efforts to engage the acquisitive economic values of American commercial culture and to translate those values into Catholic terms. Though these translations did not involve celebrations of wealth for wealth's sake, they did acknowledge the Church's dependence upon the voluntary contributions of the laity, and the importance of Catholic philanthropy.

While many American Catholics advocated an ethic of hard work, self-denial, and savings, they failed to espouse the secularized bourgeois value of accumulation as the highest goal in life. Nor did they subscribe to the tenets of a socially and culturally dominant Protestantism. The irenic, cooperative spirit expressed by members of Mathew Carey's generation towards their fellow Christians had given way by mid-century to a competitive, aggressive stance. Suspicion of, and hostility towards, Protestantism developed, in part, as a reaction to domestic anti-Popery. But it was also shaped by the wider currents of international Catholicism. Rome saw itself locked in battle with the forces of liberalism, social, and indifferentism—all modern errors deriving from the arch-heresy of Protestantism. The Church was engaged in a spiritual and a cultural war which was fought on many fronts, and which involved American Catholics in chronic disputes with, and in rancorous attacks upon, their Protestant opposites.

Among the most contested issues in this prolonged ideological conflict was the rela-
tion of Roman Catholicism to Western, and especially European, civilization. Clergy-
men and laymen alike addressed this question, and it involved at times historians, politi-
cians, theologians, men of letters, and political economists. In such texts as François
Guizot’s General History of Civilization in Europe, Napoleon Roussel’s Catholic and Pro-
estant Nations Compared in Their Relations to Wealth, Knowledge, and Morality, and
Emile Laveleye’s Protestantism and Catholicism in Their Bearing Upon the Liberty and
Prosperity of Nations, European liberals argued that the Church had been the enemy of
freedom and an impediment to progress.21 They drew upon historical sources, travelers’
accounts, official reports and statistics for evidence of the comparative social, political,
and economic circumstances of Protestant and Catholic states. The British, Dutch, and
Germans were stable, moral, prosperous, and progressive nations; the Irish, Italians, and
the Spanish were not. In the opening of The Protestant Ethic, Weber had cited Laveleye
as an authority, and many of Weber’s assumptions about Catholicism, freedom, and
economic development have their origins in this controversial literature.22

Catholic controversialists answered Guizot’s and Laveleye’s texts, in turn, with such
works as Jaime Balmes’ Protestantism and Catholicism Compared in their Effects Upon the
Civilization of Europe, the Abbé Martin’s Future of Protestantism and Catholicism, and
Baron de Hauville’s The Future of the Catholic Peoples.23 Though a number of Catholic
authors granted that Protestant states were more advanced economically, they rejected
the equation of national income with national morality. Great Britain might be rich, but
crime, drunkenness, and illegitimacy plagued English society; Spanish peasants might
have little; yet they were fed, housed and clothed better than the denizens of London’s
slums. Civilization, Balmes contended, was a spiritual, not a material phenomenon. Eu-
eropean civilization was Christian, but it was in decline since the Reformation. The solu-
tions to the troubles besetting the modern world were to be found in the eternal truths
of Catholicity, not in the illusion of progress.24

When American Catholics joined in the debate over Catholicity and civilization,
they usually followed the lines of the continental controversialists. They acknowledged
that the Protestant nations were, in general, more wealthy, but they objected to defini-
tions of national well-being in strictly economic terms. Nor did they accept the implicit
message that Protestants’ prosperity proved that Protestantism was the superior form of
Christianity. They rejected any equivalence between material conditions and spiritual
truths. The “superiority” of Protestant nations could be accounted for by differences in
climate, government, natural resources and social habits, but not by confessional affilia-
tion. The poverty of the Irish, for example, resulted from English tyranny, not pop-
erty.25 Catholic critics also made a number of important qualifications to European
anti-Protestant arguments. “Throne and Altar” conservatives like Balmes were hostile
toward republicanism and liberalism, which they identified with the rebellious spirit of
the Reformation and the French Revolution.26 American Catholics, ever sensitive to the
criticisms of nativists, denied any essential connection between Protestantism and re-
publicanism.27 They insisted, instead, that their faith would be the necessary element in
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American social and political stability: the Church alone could provide the common moral leadership required by the citizenry. This assertion appeared especially true of the marketplace, where Protestant individualism encouraged avarice and selfish amorality. Catholicity would ensure probity and the authentic "self-denial" required for sound commerce and a stable civilization.28

Nor were such reviewers as John L. Spalding and Orestes Brownson prepared to concede that only Protestant states were economically and socially advanced.29 They suggested that Catholic states, too, showed signs of material progress. Belgium was as developed a society as any in Europe, and the other Catholic nations were sure to follow its lead.30 In making such comparisons, the Americans were less concerned with the relative position of European societies than with the prospects for their own republic. The United States, they presumed, would one day become a Catholic nation. Protestantism, in their analysis, was collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions; while religious indifferentism, the final product of the Reformation, could not meet the needs of a deeply devout populace. Since Catholicism would soon be the predominant religious force in the land, they wished their fellow citizens to see the Church as an advocate, not an opponent, of economic and scientific progress, and as the final guarantor of public morality.

Catholicity and American civilization—as construed by Spalding, Brownson and company—were moving towards convergence. The Catholic America projected by American Catholics would integrate the particular genius of the republic with the strength and stability of the Church. Catholicism would direct the acquisitive drives of an energetic commercial people towards spiritual, not selfish, ends. The Church would infuse an increasingly amoral market-place with the principles of natural law and distributive justice. The plight of the poor, while not eliminated, would be greatly reduced under the Church's care. And Christian philanthropy would restore the wealthy to their roles as patrons and benefactors.

These members of the Catholic community—an articulate minority within a religious minority—dissented from the faith of the American Protestant majority. But they did not reject the political and economic ideologies of the dominant culture. Rather, they assimilated them whenever possible, and tried to adapt them to Catholic ends whenever necessary. Little evidence appears in their speeches and writings of preferences for "traditional" economic endeavors or encouragements of an exclusive other-worldliness. While not Protestants, they preached a gospel of work in the world quite similar to their confessional rivals. And while quite concerned about the excesses of capitalism, these Catholic authors promoted many of the values of capitalist culture. If, as Weber suggested, a "Catholic ethic" persisted in nineteenth-century Europe, a similar "ethic" did not emerge in the public discourse of Catholics in nineteenth-century America.31
Notes


7. Weber, Protestant Ethic, chapters 2, 4-5. A useful guide to what Weber’s central arguments regarding capitalism were, and were not, can be found in Marshall, In Search, 17-68.


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13. The literature of learned, political, and popular anti-popery in nineteenth century America is huge, and these arguments exist in hundreds of sources. For examples, see: Samuel E.B. Morse, Confessions of a French Catholic Priest. To Which Are Added Warnings to the People of the United States (New York: D. & Van Nostrand, 1837); E.M. Atwood, Present Aspects of Romanism (New York: American and Foreign Christian Union, 1868); Samuel W. Barnum, Romanism As It Is: An Exposition of the Roman Catholic System, for the Use of the American People, Embracing... Its Distinctive Features in Theory and in Practice, Its Characteristic Tendencies and Aims, In Statistical and Moral Position, and Its Special Relation to American Institutions and Liberties... (Hartford: Connecticut Publishing Co., 1871); Justin Fulton, Washington in the Lap of Rome (Boston: W. Kellaway, 1888).


16. Ibid., 618-622, 626-628.


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23. Jaime Luciano Balmes, El Protestantismo Comparado con el Catholicismo en sus relaciones con la civilización Europea (Barcelona, 1842-1844); Abbé François Martin, De l'avenir du Protestantisme et du Catholicisme (Paris: 1875); Prosper Charles Alexandre, Baron de Hauleville, De l'avenir des peuples Catholiques (Bruxelles, E. Haenen, 1878). All three texts were translated into English.


